



## THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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# First Lady Vikki Shirley receives \$300,000 Ariz. state grant to train Red Mesa High School students as peer helpers

**RED MESA, Ariz.** – Navajo Nation First Lady Vikki Shirley traveled here Thursday to collect the first of three annual \$100,000 Arizona state grant checks, and help launch the Navajo Nation's first teen pilot program to prevent underage drinking and DUI.

"Protecting You, Protecting Me" is an alcohol use prevention curriculum that trains high school students to teach elementary school children about the hazards of underage drinking.

The program seeks to reduce the incidence and prevalence of underage consumption of alcoholic beverages among children and youth, reduce the incidence of children and youth riding with impaired drivers, and reduce the incidence of injury and death to children

and youth while riding with impaired drivers.

"On behalf of the Red Mesa School District and the Navajo Nation, I accept this and want to say thank you to our mother, Janet Napolitano. She's been very supportive," Mrs. Shirley said, who was accompanied by Martha Shelly, wife of Navajo Nation Vice President Ben Shelly.

The program was created by the national organization Mothers Against Drunk Driving. The Red Mesa School District program is the first on the Navajo Nation and is being funded through Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano's Office for Children, Youth and Families.

"Alcohol abuse kills more children than all illegal drugs combined," said Lucas Tate, who delivered the check from Gov. Napolitano's office. "Alcohol goes right to the heart of a community, alcohol goes right to the heart of a family. It's a serious problem that needs serious resources."



*Lucas Tate, from Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano's Office for Children, Youth and Families, presents the first of three \$100,000 checks to Navajo Nation First Lady Vikki Shirley and Red Mesa School District Superintendent Peter Belletto for the first "Protecting You, Protecting Me" teen-based alcohol awareness program on the Navajo Nation.*

He said PYPM is a community-based approach that gives state officials a better idea how to move forward across the state.



"This program allows high school students to teach the younger, so we would have to train the high school students first and then the high school students would, in turn, teach the young students, those that are in the lower level grades, about the dangers of alcohol use," Mrs. Shirley said. "It's a curriculum that talks about health and how alcohol use plays on the body, for instance, how alcohol affects the brain, how it affects other organs like the liver, the heart, the lungs."



**Navajo Nation First Lady Vikki Shirley and Navajo Vice President Ben Shelly's wife Martha Shelly are interviewed by student broadcaster Candace Wilson on Red Mesa High School radio station KRMH about the PYPM program and their roles as ambassadors for the Navajo Nation.**

PYPM is designed to reach children before they have fully shaped their attitudes and opinions about alcohol use. The curriculum focuses on the effects of alcohol on the developing brain during the first 21 years of life.

The Red Mesa students who will be the first to take the course and teach younger children are Dustin Blackhat, Chantelle White, Irwin Lameman, Aason Alfred and Donovan Charley. They are all high school juniors.

Jess King, who has already begun to teach the course, said these students will, in turn, teach 4th and 5th graders about the dangers of underage drinking.

PYPM lessons reinforce the fact that the brains of children and adolescents are still maturing and respond to alcohol in a dramatically different way than it does in adults, putting children at a much higher risk. The curriculum provides a series of 40 lessons, eight lessons for each grade one through five.

The course will teach students about underage consumption of alcoholic beverages, vehicle-related risks, especially as passengers in vehicles in which the driver is not alcohol-free, the role and importance of the brain, it's growth and development, the dangers of alcohol exposure to the developing brain, the importance of making good decisions, and how to become media literate.

In an interview with KRMH radio host Candace Wilson, Mrs. Shirley said PYPM has been shown to be an effective program.

"There's proven research that it does work because younger children look up to older children as their role models, and that's how this research was researched, put into place," she said. "That's a proven method of teaching."

The curriculum has been tested with over 3,500 elementary school students in six states and Guam in three separate pilot tests using classroom teachers, high school students in a Peer Assistance and Leadership Program, and MADD staff and volunteers as presenters.

Research shows that the risk for alcohol and other drug use skyrockets when children enter the 6th grade, between the ages of 12 and 13. To be effective in preventing alcohol use by teenagers, peer helpers must reach out and educate children in grades one through five.

MADD's National Elementary School Project is a nationwide effort to prevent alcohol use by youth and Protecting You/Protecting Me is an important first step in the project. Mrs. Shirley is on MADD's National Diversity Project Advisory Board.

"We selected Red Mesa because they really reached out to us," Mrs. Shirley said. "We're looking for those kinds of schools, those kinds of communities that are willing to reach out."



**Navajo Nation First Lady Vikki Shirley and Superintendent Peter Belletto wish the students well as they head out for their regional basketball tournament on Thursday.**